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## EGO IDEAL AND SUPEREGO

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Originally the terms "ego ideal" and "superego" were used by Freud interchangeably. This fact can be explained historically. From the study of psychopathology, especially of melancholic disorders, Freud concluded that a part of the ego (a province within the ego) could oppose itself to the ego proper, making demands upon it and punishing it as formerly the parents had done. This means that through the process of identification the superego is formed as a substructure of the ego. In the course of development this process occurs at the end of the phallic phase (at the onset of latency) as a result of the solution of the oedipal object relationships. The superego is, according to Freud's formulation, the heir of the oedipus complex, and comprises the child's wish to be like the parents (ideal formation) and to comply with the parental restrictions and demands (superego in a narrower sense). These conceptualizations could account for and explain a variety of pathological phenomena in individuals (Freud, 1914, 1917, 1923, 1924a, 1924b, 1925, 1931) as well as in mankind (Freud, 1921, 1927b, 1930, 1939). In addition, they also explained normal psychological processes, e.g., humor (1927a).

Notwithstanding the gains in insight, there continued to exist a number of problems and inconsistencies which, according to Freud, were in need of further study and explanation. In recent years several authors have made contributions to the superego problems. For a more detailed review of the literature, I refer the reader to Sandler (1960).

From a structural point of view, I think we must adhere to Freud's conception of the superego as a special substructure in the

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human mind, established at the onset of latency. Yet how are we to explain the difficulties and confusions around this concept which many authors have mentioned? Structuralization of the mind is a maturational and developmental process. The genetic point of view has brought about many clarifications of mental processes. I therefore propose to turn to the genesis of mental substructures of the ego in approximately normal development, and to examine separately the ideal formation and the self-criticizing punishing agency.

### THE GENESIS OF EGO SUBSTRUCTURES

#### *The Genesis of the Ego Ideal*

The child is born with an unstructured mind. The inborn potentialities out of which a structured mind is developed during growth are called by Freud the id in a wider sense; Hartmann (1939, 1950) speaks of the "undifferentiated phase." The newborn has vital needs which have to be sufficiently satisfied in order to guarantee survival and to ensure the reign of the pleasure principle. As long as the infant-mother unity is need-satisfying there is no stimulation for accelerating the maturational process. However, birth itself already causes unpleasurable sensations, and soon afterwards the satisfaction of needs does not occur as immediately and as completely so as to avoid unpleasure. The experiences of alternate pleasure and pain stimulate development, and gradually a primitive structuralization of the mind comes into being. A number of functions begin to develop: sensual stimuli are laid down into memory traces (structuralization of the brain), outside and inside are distinguished (object and self), testing of reality, etc. I do not need to mention all of them, they are too well known as functions which later on will be organized. In the structured mind they build up that ego organization which must attempt to allow sufficient satisfaction of needs and wishes and at the same time to adjust to the necessities of life and to the demands of the environment.<sup>1</sup>

I will now turn to a special function of the very primitive ego, manifesting itself already in the first months of life, because I think

<sup>1</sup> Modern ego psychology is so far advanced as to give us a fairly good insight into the development of a number of functions of the ego organization (Hartmann, 1939, 1950; and many other authors).

it has a bearing on our topic, the genesis of the later-established ego ideal.

When the little baby becomes aware of unpleasurable stimuli and tensions he is still bodily too immature to take appropriate action. He cannot produce food or warmth or comfort when he is hungry or cold or nearly overwhelmed by inner tensions. When the mother is not instantly available the infant takes refuge in "hallucinatory wish fulfillment," as Freud called it in earlier times.

I think these hallucinations occur already at a time when the function of distinguishing between self and outside world is not yet established. They appear during the narcissistic stage, when the mother (or the breast) is still part of the internal narcissistic milieu and not yet an object (Hoffer, 1950). However, as "hallucinating" does not abolish unpleasure in the long run, whereas the mother does, we may consider these processes as the starting point for the development of distinction between inner and outer world.

As long as no object outside the self is recognized these hallucinations are not yet fantasies, centering around an object that provides pleasure or abolition of unpleasure. They are self-centered and, as far as they can temporarily alleviate discomfort, the gain is narcissistic satisfaction.

The reason why I dwelt so long on this early and primitive ego function is that, in my opinion, we meet here with the basis of the ego ideal. In terms of structuralization we could speak of a forerunner of the ego ideal. According to this assumption, the genesis of the ego ideal is to be found in an ego function, which serves to provide pleasure and to undo pain, caused by frustrations. This latter function has already been described by me in another paper (1949). The ego ideal is an *agency of wish fulfillment*. If we pursue the further development of these primitive hallucinatory wish fulfillments, I think we find confirmation of this assumption.

When the infant has learned to distinguish between self and outer world he makes an object attachment to the breast and the mother, and he expects the mother to provide satisfaction. This object attachment is still a narcissistic one; the mother is loved not for her own sake, but merely as a need-satisfying object.

During this period of differentiation between self and object new sources of unpleasure arise for the infant when the mother does not

provide satisfaction and love as completely and as instantly as he wants them. Even the most loving and devoted mother is unable to fulfill every wish, to abolish every pain or discomfort in her child. There are always situations when the child feels disappointed, frustrated, and above all *powerless* because he is unable to bring about a change in this painful state of unpleasure. To deal with this condition, so dangerous for his self-esteem (his narcissistic equilibrium), the child develops alongside the primitive hallucinatory wish fulfillments his comforting fantasies of grandeur and omnipotence. Together with the formation of object relations (first need-satisfying attachments, and later on relations of object constancy), the fantasies of omnipotence and idealization of his self continue to exist. They can easily be observed in toddlers in the preoedipal phase.

I mention two examples, among many: little John, aged two years, ten months, told his mother his penis would grow to be as big as the garden hose; he would fill the ocean and a big steamer would take him overseas.

Little Ann (three years) said: "When my penis will be as big as Dick's [her elder brother]. . . ." When her mother remarked: "But you are a little girl, only boys have a penis, why do you think you will get one?" Ann replied: "When I want it, I'll get it!"

The fantasies of grandeur are a narcissistic gratification and they heighten self-esteem. But gradually they begin to fail to do so because the child has the painful experience that they have no influence upon the actual events, and he feels his total powerlessness vis-à-vis reality. He then takes refuge in a second edition of fantasies which provide narcissistic gratification. He idealizes his parents and attributes to them omnipotence, in which he himself partakes. These images of ideal and almighty parents persist much longer, because the parents are, in comparison with the child, really much stronger, and more powerful. These fantasies flourish especially during the oedipal phase in which the child identifies himself with the parent of the same sex in order to replace him (or her) with the other parent. In normal development the child at the end of the oedipal phase accepts reality more or less through recognizing his powerlessness and the impossibility of being the mother's (or the father's) lover. His attachment to the parents is desexualized (neutralized) and a similar change takes places in his ego ideal. The contents of the ego

ideal are no longer exclusively: "I am as potent in sexual life and in other achievements as the parents." The ideals are partly transferred to attainable goals: learning, development of bodily and mental skills, understanding of reality and life in general. We know that even so-called "normal" adults sometimes take refuge in former fantasies of omnipotence in narcissistically frustrating situations. However, when they are able to live up to their own mature norms and ethics, they experience a more lasting and much greater satisfaction. *The ego ideal*, even when developed into norms, ethics, and social ideals, *remains essentially an agency of wish fulfillment*, and it supports the ego in dealing with the inevitable disappointments and frustrations inherent in human life. In a way, it is still an ego function. However, just because it has its own contents and because it sometimes puts a distance between itself and the other organized ego functions, we can speak of an established substructure (or province) within the ego.

I shall next discuss the self-criticizing, prohibiting, and punishing agency which we could term "superego in a narrower sense" or "conscience."

### *The Genesis of the Superego*

Before the infant distinguishes between self and outside world there is no question of "prohibitions, demands, or punishment." The infant merely experiences sensations of unpleasure. When the distinction between self and environment has been established the infant may experience restrictions of his needs and wishes from outside as prohibitions or demands. It seems plausible to assume that the earlier unpleasurable sensations form the basis of his experience of these restrictions. When he protests against complying with them, anxiety may arise. In order to avoid anxiety and to preserve the object (later on the love of the object), he will begin to try to live up to the demands.

The toddler may, to a certain extent, internalize the parental demands and even their punishments. The acceptance of the inevitable environmental claims leads to the establishment of an ego function, which can be considered to be a forerunner of conscience and which thus is an *agency of restriction* imposed upon the little child from outside. The conflict is between child and environment

and is apt to arouse anxiety, but not yet guilt. Only at the end of the oedipal phase, when the child must give up his sexual wishes, do the environmental demands and restrictions become an inner property. The ego functions of renouncing certain wish fulfillments and of complying with parental demands now can be structuralized into the judging superego or conscience.

In normal development the superego and the ego ideal guide the ego in its double task, on the one hand of allowing the individual to have sufficient satisfaction of drives, needs, impulses, etc., and on the other hand of modifying and sublimating part of them in order to live up to the demands of the outside world and to cope with the inevitable restrictions.

### Summary

The genesis of the ego ideal and of the restricting superego or conscience is different. The ego ideal is originally and essentially a *need-satisfying agency*, whereas the superego (or conscience) is originally and essentially a *restricting and prohibiting agency*.

In the development of the ego ideal four phases can be distinguished:

1. "Hallucinatory" wish fulfillment in the narcissistic phase (in which self and outer world are not yet distinguished)
2. Fantasies of grandeur and omnipotence of the self after the infant has become aware of a distinction between inside and outside
3. Fantasies of the parents being omnipotent, and sharing their omnipotence after experiencing his own powerlessness
4. Formation of ethics and ideals as attainable goals after disillusionment by the idealized parents.

In the development of the restricting superego, four phases can be distinguished:

1. Experience of sensations of unpleasure
2. Renunciation of wish fulfillment and compliance with parental demands in order to preserve the parents' love
3. Internalization of single demands through identification with some parental demands during the preoedipal phase
4. Inner conscience and internal acceptance of restrictions and

punishments imposed by the parents and the wider environment in order to guarantee a social relationship within a certain class or group or milieu.

Now the question arises: how was it that originally both ego ideal and restricting superego were seen as one single agency and one substructure within the ego? I believe it is because at the onset of latency their establishment is centered around the same object representations, the parental images, the purely narcissistic prestages having been abandoned. The content of the ego ideal, once the third phase of its development has been reached, could be expressed as follows: "I am like my parents (that is, in fantasy: omnipotent)." The content of the superego from an early stage of its development onward could be described in the following way: "I will live up to the parents' demands, and punish myself like they punished me when I fail to do so (that is, in fantasy: I have to be obedient to avoid loss of love of the parents)."

The ego ideal's content, "I am like the parents," implies taking over parental ideals and ethics. The superego's content, "I have to do what the parents require of me," implies taking over parental restrictions and prohibitions. Both institutions are marked by identification with the parents and the parental images. From the structural point of view, we can describe them as substructures within the ego, as a change of part of the ego through these identifications.

If we examine their functions, however, they serve opposite ends. The ego ideal serves wish fulfillment and is a gratifying agency. The conscience (superego in the narrower sense) is a restricting and prohibiting agency. However, in this strictly schematic sense, this statement is true only in a very harmonious development. Because both agencies unite into one substructure, they may considerably influence each other's functions. The ego ideal's content, "I am like my parents," can acquire an imperative compulsive character: "I must be like my parents." Later on high ideals in general may be experienced as demands.

Even within the range of so-called "normality" there are many individual differences which can be explained in two ways: (1) we may assume a definite and rigid change of function after the establishment of the substructure superego in the wider sense; and (2) we



may see them as individual variations which already show a tendency toward inharmonious development. I myself am inclined toward the second explanation, because in a number of cases we clearly observe that living up to ethics, ideals, and norms is and remains a source of pleasure. It may provide real satisfaction through heightening self-esteem and self-assurance and so promote a number of gratifying ego activities. A strong compulsion to normative and ethical behavior (Kant's categorical imperative) points to an oversevere, judging superego, as is, for example, often found in persons with an obsessional-neurotic character. As in many other instances, the transitions between "normality" and "pathology" are fluent.

Be this as it may, the origins of both agencies can be traced back to infancy. Under certain circumstances (most clearly in pathology), a disintegration of the one or the other, sometimes of both at the same time, takes place and regression to primitive, infantile stages occurs. Identifications with the mother and with the father naturally differ from each other. These as well as identifications made on different levels of development may again come to the fore and may cause splits in the entity of both agencies.

### THE VISIBILITY OF STRUCTURE IN THE MIND

I now want to take up a problem which Freud mentioned on several occasions but to which other psychoanalysts have not paid sufficient attention. In the behavior of a "normal," well-integrated, harmoniously developed adult, we cannot always directly distinguish the different structures and substructures of the mind, because in this case the mind acts as a whole. When a person's ego has secured sufficient satisfaction of id needs and impulses and when the ego is able to master the id strivings which cannot be satisfied, using their (neutralized) energy for constructive purposes, it is no longer possible to distinguish clearly what share the ego and id have in a number of activities. The same applies to a distinction between shares of the (judging) superego and the ego ideal in these activities. A person capable of living up to his inner ethics and ideals *and* capable of sound self-criticism, who can provide himself with sufficient gratifications in accordance with his own environment, acts as a whole, as an entity. The fact that the provinces of the mind were

originally distinct and separate entities becomes apparent only under special circumstances. In "normal" individuals this occurs in specific life situations which require a reorientation, e.g., in adolescence where the former balance between id and ego, ego ideal and superego has to be revised due to the maturing sexuality, love life, and object choices. I described some of the problems involved in my paper "On Adolescence" (1960). In the menopause and in old age other problems arise. In these phases of relative unbalance the different structures of the mind and the various identifications may become much more visible until a new harmony is again achieved. It then becomes very clear that a variety of new contents has been added to the original ones.

In disturbed, inharmonious development which leads to neuroses, ego distortions, delinquency, psychoses, etc., the structuralization of the mind becomes much more observable. Partial and unequal regressions to earlier developmental stages of id, ego, ego ideal, and superego provide a clearer picture of how the mind was structuralized in the course of maturation and development.

For practical purposes we try to assess the nature and gravity of given disturbances and of their accessibility to psychoanalytic (or other psychotherapeutic) treatment. Treatment aims at tracing back the disturbances to their origins in order to enable the mature ego to employ the mental energies in a different (and healthier) way. In this context, it is necessary to look for criteria enabling us to assess the extent to which different parts of the structured mind have contributed to the disturbance. In many instances, the differences in the development of the superego and ego ideal may play an important role in the final outcome of the disturbance.

## SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN REGARD TO PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

### *The Classical Psychoneuroses*

In hysteria, phobia, and obsessional neurosis a regression of libido and aggression to earlier developmental stages takes place in consequence of severe guilt feelings and strong castration anxiety. This early statement of Freud's can still be confirmed in our daily analytic work. The primary regression of the drives is sometimes followed by a secondary regression of a number of ego functions in connection

with defensive processes and of some rigid defense mechanisms.<sup>2</sup> We then speak of ego distortions. The ego functions laid down in the ego ideal and restricting superego may participate in these events. This is clearly observable in obsessional neurotics. Here the drives regress to the anal phase and this regression is followed by a restriction of ego activities, e.g., of sublimated actions, and by a regression of the restricting superego, which becomes a very sadistic agency through sexualization and turning of aggression toward the self. The ego ideal may secondarily regress to the phase of fantasies of grandeur and omnipotence, of magical thinking. These processes cause distortion of reality testing. Usually a part of the ego is still very well able to judge reality, while another part follows the regressed ego-ideal functions and adheres to a belief in the possibility of magically influencing the environment. Thus, splits in the ego and ego ideal have come into being, and the patient feels torn apart.

In hysterical patients, the ego disturbance observable as a consequence of the regression of libido to the phallic phase seems to be less severe. It limits itself to an inhibition of some functions, e.g., of memory. The function of memory is more or less impaired through the defense mechanism of repression, which causes gaps in the patient's life history and may have a bearing on his judgment of reality factors.

### *Narcissistic Neuroses, Borderline Cases, and Psychoses*

A different process seems to have occurred in these disorders. Here we may assume a regression of ego functions together with the libidinal regression. Both could be called primary regression. An alternative could be a disturbance of ego activities in the prephallic stage, an arrest of ego maturation, or a severe retardation in development originating already in the preoedipal phase. In narcissistic neuroses, it is sometimes difficult to decide whether we are dealing with an early arrest or with regression. In psychoses and borderline cases, there seems to be a closer tie to an early level of ego development. Concerning large areas of the restricting superego and of the ego ideal we clearly observe a position of an infantile nature. In these patients we see that the restricting superego has only partly

<sup>2</sup> The distinction between primary and secondary ego regression is used by Anna Freud in the assessment of childhood development.

reached the state of an inner voice, of a real conscience. These patients can submit only to the actual restrictions coming from outside, and then under the pressure of severe anxiety and primitive fears. The internalized part is limited mostly to self-punishment of a very sadistic, cruel, archaic nature. The contents of the ego ideal of borderline patients are still the primitive ideals of the little child, the fantasies of grandeur and omnipotence. A development toward adult morals and ethics is lacking or defective. Naturally, the interplay between the id and the defective ego and superego functions may cause further distortions of the ego ideal, and thus interfere with its normal functioning.

### *Delinquents*

A special discordance of the superego and ego-ideal development is found in delinquents. In my paper, "Neurotics, Delinquents and Ideal-Formation" (1949), I described some vicissitudes of the defective development of ideals and conscience. It is well known that delinquents often suffer from a severe, punishing superego, and that they often commit antisocial acts in order to satisfy their need for punishment. In many of these offenders we find a poorly developed ego ideal clinging to very primitive fantasies of grandeur. These pleasurable fantasies are retained in order to compensate for the pain experienced in the clash with the environment. The ego ideal has in principle preserved its original character as a wish-fulfilling agency. The superego in its turn holds to its restricting and punishing function, though both are distorted and fail to function in an adequate way. The ego ideal's failure to provide real and adequate wish fulfillments creates new frustrations, which in their turn cause further regression to primitive fantasies of omnipotence.

These sketchy remarks on different developments, normal and abnormal, are necessarily oversimplified. We must never forget that the different stages of preoedipal development contribute to the genesis of the ego, the restricting superego, and the ego ideal. The archaic state of mind scarcely ever disappears completely. Even with minor disturbances an inharmonious growth of these agencies can come into being. I have already mentioned that in approximately "normal" adolescence, disharmonies between the different parts and functions of the mind can be observed (1949). Within the ego-ideal

functions proper, there may be unbalance as well. A person can have highly developed norms and ethics in one area, together with defective ones in other areas. One example out of many can be found in delinquency. A group of delinquents can adjust to a severe code of norms within their own group while offending the norms of the larger community and society. The same is valid for the restricting superego. Very severe demands and self-punishment in one area can exist side by side with refusal of acceptance of inevitable restrictions in other fields, e.g., where property and interests of other people are concerned.

### SUMMARY

The ego ideal and the restricting superego originate alongside each other in primitive forerunners in infancy. They may be considered as special ego areas with their own functions. At the onset of the latency period they are centered around the parental images.

In harmonious development, they act together as a substructure within the ego organization, guiding the ego in its achievements. Throughout life the ego ideal remains essentially an agency of wish fulfillment. The superego is a restricting agency, necessary for living in a given community.

In abnormal development, traces of the origins of both ego ideal and superego can be observed as a consequence of fixations on and regressions to primitive developmental stages. The different identifications may be used as defense mechanisms in a pathological way and so add to the disharmony of the individual.

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